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# Worcester Writers

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David Shaw

My Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) offered new experiences with technology and the humanities. The main goal of the project (Worcester Area Writers) was to write about authors that had some sort of significant connection to the Worcester county area. It demonstrated the synergistic effects of utilizing the internet to help distribute information in forms which would appeal not only to serious researchers and students, but also those who might simply be hoping to learn more about an author they had enjoyed reading.

At the outset of the project, I had very little idea of which author I wanted to pursue researching and writing about. I considered a number of possibilities but ultimately settled on Thomas Wentworth Higginson. After having read a small portion of his *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, I was hooked. Higginson presented his account of what life was like during the Civil War as the colonel of the first regiment of freed slaves. I decided that in order to help write a biographical piece about Higginson that I should read as much of his work as possible (much of his writing is either autobiographical or memoirs). In addition to this path, I also pursued other biographical sources about Higginson.

One of my major concerns during the course of the project was that of copyright. There had been a previous project which had produced a similar website to what we were hoping to put together. However, the previous project had had many issues with using images that they neither owned nor had permissions to. Fortunately, one of the major advantages of choosing a Civil War era writer was that much of the biographical material written about him had long since passed into the public domain. As such, it was quite easy to find pictures of Higginson which could be scanned without requiring permissions. A class in digital imaging that I had taken in 2008 paid off during this process. Using my prior knowledge of Photoshop, I was able to adjust for any crookedness, lack of clarity or resolution problems with the scanned images. Unfortunately, one of the major disadvantages of choosing a Civil War era writer was that neither he nor any of the people who knew him are still alive today.

After finishing writing about Higginson, I had a difficult time in selecting my next author to research and write about. I definitely wanted to find someone whose work would be engaging and, if possible, whose life would be an interesting topic to read about as well. After a couple of false starts, Professor Dempsey recommended Etheridge Knight to me. Once I had read some of his poetry and heard a bit about his life, I decided to pursue reading as much as possible by and about Knight. While I found Knight's poetry to be extremely powerful and that it resonated with me, there wasn't a large amount of it. Knight had died in 1991, younger than he should have, due to a battle with drug addiction, a horrible car accident and lung cancer.

I hit a bit of a roadblock while attempting to research Etheridge Knight's life; there was very little biographical information available. Many of the online sources I pursued were either very sparse or essentially copied and pasted from one another. Further, some of the sites which showed up on my searches were no longer active or otherwise unavailable. Finding myself at somewhat of an impasse, I had to find another way to gather the amount of information about Knight that I would need in order to write about him.

Pursuing a different path, I had learned that Fran Quinn was a friend of the late Etheridge Knight. I knew that one of the other members of the IQP, Davis Nguyen, was in contact with Quinn about an interview they were planning to do, so I decided to ask Quinn if he would be able to do an additional interview. However, by the time the date for the interview rolled around, Quinn had to delay the interview twice due to health concerns. Eventually the interview did get done, though, and it provided a wealth of information about Knight that would have been difficult to get a hold of otherwise.

The interview with Fran Quinn not only provided me with information that would be useful in my writing but also an opportunity to create some multimedia for the website. The process of first learning how to edit the video and then finally putting it together into a form that would be useful to the project was a very valuable experience to me. First, I had to go through the raw recorded video and pick out the parts that were going to be potentially useful and which parts were simply out of the question (such as when Quinn's phone rang and he had to answer it). Once I had further narrowed the selections down into what I was actually going to use, I needed to tweak the audio in a few sections (eliminating distracting background noises, for example).

My original plan had been to keep the video as a single entity but I ended up deciding to split it into smaller clips. This would help users of the website to pinpoint the specific topic they wished to hear about and help them avoid wasting time viewing or skipping over unwanted information. Further, it would help to keep the individual file sizes smaller.

Ultimately, I feel that I learned a great deal from the Worcester Area Writers IQP. I not only acquired some new skills, but also refreshed and refined some of my existing skills. Perhaps most importantly though, I gained a greater appreciation for how technology and multimedia tools can help to augment traditional methods of distributing information.